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Strengthening the Department of Public Information, within the existing capacity, in order to support and enhance the United Nations web site in all official languages of the Organization: follow-up

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The Department of Public Information is realigning its priorities with regard to the web site as contained in the report of the Secretary-General of 7 March 2003 (A/AC.198/2003/2) by strengthening the language capacity in the Website Section through the proposed redeployment of posts and streamlining the workflow, thereby increasing synergies and reducing compartmentalization.

* A/58/150.

** The submission of the report was delayed in order to reflect the latest available information.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its decision 57/579 of 20 December 2002, requested the Secretary-General to proceed with the implementation of his proposal on strengthening the web site through the redeployment of resources within the Department of Public Information, giving priority to the language posts required, and to report on the status of implementation to the Assembly at its fifty-eighth session.

2. The present report is submitted in response to decision 57/579.

II. Background

3. In keeping with the expressed wishes of Member States, the Department of Public Information, as manager of the United Nations web site, has continued its efforts to enhance parity among the official languages on the web site. At the request of the Fifth Committee, the Secretary-General presented proposals for strengthening the Department of Public Information in order to support and enhance the United Nations web site in all official languages of the Organization. In paragraph 8 of his report of 27 August 2002 (A/57/355), the Secretary-General indicated that the current resource capacity of the Department in regard to enhancing parity among official languages on the web site was barely at maintenance level and was not adequate to sustain the rapid expansion in the use of the web site or to keep pace with the daily addition of new material occurring in all the official languages. The Secretary-General recommended that additional resources in the amount of $1,297,500 would need to be identified to strengthen the Department in order to support and enhance the United Nations web site in all official languages.

III. The multilingual United Nations web site

4. The United Nations web site continues to grow in popularity. It reached yet another milestone on 5 February 2003 by recording more than 10 million hits during a 24-hour period. In contrast, the site had received 11.5 million hits during the entire year in 1996. (The corresponding figure for 2002 was 1,695 million hits.) The site has become a very cost-effective medium for the dissemination of information about the activities of the United Nations to far corners of the world at a continually decreasing cost per unit. With the improvement in connectivity, increasing numbers of users from developing countries are gaining access to this important resource. The growth in hits has been recorded across all official languages sites, reflecting both the increasing number of pages available for viewing and the increasing accessibility for users in those languages.

5. The recent linkage of the Official Document System (ODS) for parliamentary documentation to the web site is an important step towards realizing the goal of parity among the official languages on the web site and has significantly boosted the number of documents available in each language. Since September 2002, over 28,000 documents in the six languages have been linked directly to ODS.

6. A key priority for the Department in line with General Assembly decision 57/579 is to institutionalize the language capacity in the Website Section on a sound,

sustainable and regular basis, through the allocation of regular posts for three of the language assistants (Arabic, Chinese, Spanish) who are currently on general temporary assistance. At the present time, with one language coordinator and one assistant, in each language, there is no back-up and most of the time is consumed by ever-increasing maintenance tasks for existing material. To redress this situation, the Department is proposing the redeployment of 1 P-4 and 6 General Service posts to the Website Section, which have been reflected in the budget proposals for the biennium 2004-2005.

IV. New approaches

7. The Department of Public Information is implementing other innovative approaches towards achieving the goal of multilingualism within the context of existing resources. The Committee on Information, at its twenty-fifth session in April 2003, endorsed the proposal of the Secretary-General to redeploy some of the resources to be freed up by consolidating the United Nations information centres in Europe into a regional hub, to enhance, among other areas, the language capacity of the Website Section. The possibility that some resources could be redeployed to other existing information centres working in the respective languages to carry out portions of the work on the multilingual web sites has been examined. While the major portions of the work on the United Nations web site, such as design, programming, webcasting and overall oversight would need to be carried out from Headquarters, some elements such as translations, routine updating and maintenance could be carried out by full-time qualified language assistants operating out of United Nations information centres. This would also require the consequent strengthening of management capabilities in the respective languages within the web-site operations at Headquarters. The Department intends to undertake a pilot exercise, once resources are available, at one duty station to test the viability of the concept. If successful, expansion to other duty stations will be considered. This could also facilitate the handling of material for translation and processing for not only the Department of Public Information but also for other offices in the Secretariat on a cost-reimbursable basis.

8. The Organization has also responded effectively to the demands created by the 24-hour news cycle through a continually updated News Centre, now available in Arabic, English, French and Russian. A key component of the Department's plan to strengthen language parity on the United Nations web site is the expansion of the United Nations News Centre into all official languages by mid-September 2003. The News Centre is one of the most popular United Nations sites and serves as one of the gateways to other information sources system-wide. The synergies increasingly permitted by new technologies are being realized through increased coordination between news producing units and the Website Section, facilitated by the creation of the Internet Service, to achieve that objective within existing sources. However, it should be stressed that, given the intense demands of today's 24-hour news cycle, without adequate back-up, both technical and editorial, such an approach is highly vulnerable to disruption.

9. The Department is increasingly using the academic community worldwide to expand its language capacity. It has concluded an agreement with the University of Salamanca in Spain by which its School of Languages has provided over 1,200 pages of material translated into Spanish, at no cost to the Organization. A similar

agreement is pending with a university in Egypt, and the Department is aggressively pursuing that strategy with other universities for similar translation arrangements into the other languages. While that action is increasing the available material in the official languages, the need for editorial control, programming and processing places an additional workload on existing staff resources.

10. Achieving greater parity on the United Nations web site cannot be the responsibility of the Department of Public Information alone, since other departments bear primary responsibility for the contents of pages relating to their work. The Department of Public Information is therefore working in close coordination with other departments throughout the Secretariat, encouraging and assisting them to increase the availability of their materials in all official languages. The General Assembly, in paragraph 63 of resolution 57/130 B, noted that content-providing offices had not, in general, been making their materials on the United Nations web site available in all six official languages. A number of departments have requested increased provisions in their budget for the biennium 2004-2005 to help meet that goal.

11. In the next few months, with the assistance of pro bono services, a thorough analysis of the web site will be carried out. The study, to be conducted across departments in the Secretariat, will formulate realistic proposals for redesigning, restructuring and refocusing the web site, including the multilingual aspects, together with the necessary hardware and connectivity requirements, and the time frame for implementation. The study will delineate the comprehensive additional resource investments essential for the achievement of this objective across the entire web-site operation of the Department of Public Information for the regular maintenance, enhancement and creation of public information content, the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management for the technological infrastructure and support services, as well as other content-providing departments and offices in the Secretariat and away from Headquarters.

V. The Official Document System

12. As the Secretary-General indicated in his report on the re-engineering of the optical disk system (A/56/120/Rev.1), in 2000 the Information Technology Services Division initiated the re-engineering of the old optical disk system in two phases in order to upgrade the old proprietary system to a new open system. On 4 September 2001, Phase 1 was completed and the newly re-engineered Official Document System (ODS) commenced its production operations, which brought significant improvements in performance, maintainability, reliability and scalability. It also opened a door for ODS to exploit new technical possibilities. On 4 February 2002, Phase 2 was completed, and the new multilingual ODS started its production operations, fully utilizing the advantage of the Lotus Notes multilingual capability, allowing users to select any of the six official languages. Once the required document is found, users can proceed to display or download the document in any of the six official languages irrespective of his/her language of operations.

13. The re-engineered ODS further made possible a direct link to documents on ODS from the United Nations web site, as proposed in the report of the Secretary-General of 20 November 2001 (A/C.5/56/12). This direct access function from the United Nations web site to ODS started its production operations on 5 June 2002

and has been incorporated into other specialized web sites of the United Nations (e.g., UNBISnet, UNHCR Web site, ECLAC Web site).

14. Since the documents are available on ODS in the six official languages, it is easy to link all language versions of documents from the United Nations web sites, facilitating the equal treatment of all official languages on the United Nations web sites. The new Internet publishing technical guidelines, which have been issued by the Working Group on Internet Matters of the Publications Board, mandate this direct access function as the means of placing the official documents on the United Nations web sites.

15. These improvements were mandatory prerequisites for the implementation of free ODS access and have paved the way for making ODS freely available. Now, ODS has a firm foundation for free access.

16. Currently, ODS is a subscription-based service. While Member States and United Nations staff members can use ODS free of charge, other users must subscribe to the ODS service for a fee, which limits the number of ODS users because each user must be assigned a user ID and password. This has ensured that the access load is reasonable, and that the current ODS system infrastructure can handle the access load reliably.

17. However, for free ODS access, there will be no user IDs for the general users and as such anyone, irrespective of location, will be able to access ODS free of charge through the Internet. As a result, the number of ODS users is expected to increase significantly. The current ODS system infrastructure is not able to handle the increased load from free ODS access and therefore will have to be upgraded.

18. The Information Technology Services Division has requested resources for the implementation of free ODS access in the 2004-2005 biennial budget, including costs of upgrading the ODS system infrastructure for better performance, reliability and disaster-readiness with a number of new high-end servers, and new or additional equipment for storage and disaster-readiness. If the budget is approved by the General Assembly, the Division will proceed with the procurement of the equipment early in 2004, followed by the implementation of free ODS access during the latter part of 2004.

VI. Status of implementation

19. Following a thorough analysis of the Department's mandated activities and the resources placed at its disposal, it is clear that General Assembly decision 57/579 on the implementation of the Secretary-General's proposals contained in his report to the Assembly at its fifty-seventh session (A/57/355) can only be carried out in phases. In the first phase, three General Service posts are to be made available to institutionalize the language capacity in the Website Section so that all official languages have one regular language assistant. In the second phase, in the context of the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005, 1 P-4 post and 6 General Service posts will be redeployed to the Website Section, thus strengthening the language capacity dedicated to the web site.

20. Identification of resources enabling the implementation of the remaining elements of the proposals will continue as an ongoing process to ensure that

sustained strengthening of language and the overall technical capacity takes place with minimal disruption to other priority-mandated activities.

VII. Conclusion

21. **The realignment of priorities, with regard to the web site as envisaged in the report of the Secretary-General on the reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications (A/AC.198/2003/2) will serve two purposes: (a) to increase synergies and boost the team approach, thereby reducing compartmentalization to the extent possible, and (b) to position the Organization's Internet capacity to take advantage of evolving technology. The ultimate objective is to take the web site into the next phase, where a technologically sound, continually updated, intuitive and user-friendly web site is available to users in their choice of language.**